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## Mary Sue Coleman

## President of the University of Michigan, professor of biological chemistry, professor of chemistry

By Deborah Meyers Greene

In 1954, eight-year-old Mary Sue Coleman was living in a large old country house near Statesboro, Georgia, about 60 miles from Savannah. Her father taught at Georgia State Teachers College in Statesboro, now called Georgia Southern University. Her mother taught high school in a nearby rural school.

"I wouldn't be surprised if our area was 50-50, Black and white," recalls Coleman, who became president of the University of Michigan in August 2002. [According to recent census figures, Statesboro is 55 percent white and 40 percent Black.] "We had Black neighbors because we lived in the country. We would play together sometimes, but the schools were totally segregated. I'm not even sure I ever knew where the Black children's school was.

"It was highly segregated, like all of the Deep South," Coleman says. "What really distresses me most about that period is that I didn't think it [segregation] was odd. That just goes to show how culture and belief systems get enforced. It was just the way things were. But how could I not have questioned that and asked why?"

## Talk that public schools might close

When the *Brown* decision was announced, "Our parents didn't want to alarm us, but there was this notion that all the schools were going to close. I'm sure that was just the fringe talking, but it was serious enough. I was aware of the talk going on.

"I have two sisters. Our parents had great aspirations for us to do something important with our lives. They told us you can do whatever you want to do with your life and you should never limit what you do. They taught us that it was important to have a good education or, without one, it would limit what you could do."

The dream of crossing boundaries to fulfill her destiny captured Coleman's heart even back then. "I vividly remember hearing an announcer on the radio one day, talking about why there were no women radio announcers. He said it was because women's voices are not pleasant to the ear. I thought, 'That's so unfair!'"

Coleman's parents sensed that their daughters' dreams might be limited by the *Brown* backlash in the South. Rather than integrate, several Southern states did ultimately withdraw support from their public schools, leading to the shut down of entire school systems in states like Virginia, and a network of all-white private academies in several others. The family made plans to leave. "My parents were alarmed. They felt that Georgia wasn't a place they could stay and raise children the way they wanted to."

"My dad had served in the Pacific in World War II, in the Navy, and got his PhD with the help of the GI Bill," Coleman continues. "He had grown up in Kentucky and my mother in Georgia, but they had lived in Boston and Chicago while he was training for the war."

After the *Brown* decision, Coleman's parents "worked hard to juggle all they had learned in their lives, traveling around the country and the world. They considered many options; they even thought about going to California. They didn't have many resources then, and it was a very big deal putting all that together to move us across the country."

## Iowa prized democratic education

Her father got an offer to join the faculty of Iowa State Teachers' College [now the University of Northern Iowa] in Cedar Falls. "At the time, Iowa's public education system was considered one of the best in the country," Coleman says. "Iowa never had segregated schools or a tradition of elite private schools. And there was a conversation at the time in Iowa about trying to make sure students had opportunities to interact [across racial and ethnic lines]. It wasn't perfect. No, it certainly wasn't perfect. But the attempt was made, and they were sincere.

"My school was like an old 'lab school,' on Northern Iowa's campus," she recalls. School officials made various attempts to enrich and broaden their students' experiences, including inviting university students from other cultures to visit. Coleman remembers that a graduate student from Ethiopia visited her school to discuss what life in his homeland was like and why he had come to Iowa to study. Her school's leaders seemed to sense that "as a society we were changing, and we have to do something to get ahead of the change."

After high school, Coleman entered Grinnell College, a private Iowa liberal arts institution. "Grinnell was founded in 1846 by the Congregational Church," Coleman says, "but it's not a church school. It's an activist campus with an ethic of social responsibility. They tried recruiting a diverse student body, and they had an exchange program that increased the critical mass."



President Mary Sue Coleman

The exchange program was with the traditionally Black school, LeMoyne College, now known as LeMoyne-Owens College, established in 1862 in Memphis. "That was a very eye-opening experience for me," Coleman says. "I got to know some young women with very different life experiences from my own. We had long talks about their experiences in the transition time around 1954. It really opened my eyes to learn what it was like. For instance, to go to a movie theater and not know if you could sit where you wanted. It really struck me that the simple act of going to a movie could be affected by segregation. I remember wondering why anyone would care enough to discriminate against people about something so trivial.

"I went back to the South for graduate school," said Coleman, who earned her PhD in biochemistry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she served 25 years later as chancellor for graduate studies and research and as associate provost and dean of research. "The difference between 1965 and 1990 was astonishing. It struck me when I returned to Chapel Hill that we're not aware of what we're not aware of, until we see the difference. The quality of academic discourse was vastly improved with the growth of racial diversity among the students and faculty. I am glad I had the opportunity to see the change."

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